Voodoo
Karen McCarthy Brown

It is likely that no other topic in this book is as misunderstood as Voodoo. Movies, television, and novels have been merciless in distorting it. In this article, Karen McCarthy Brown explains that Voodoo, or Vodou according to Haitian Creole orthography, is an African-based, Catholic-influenced religion. She also points out the differences between urban and rural Voodoo, and discusses African and Roman Catholic influence in the development of the religion. In addition, Brown discusses Voodoo spirits, Voodoo ceremonies, and the relationship of magic to Voodoo. The article concludes with some comments on the massive emigration of Haitians, mostly to Miami, New York, or Montreal, where Voodoo ceremonies are carried on in storefronts, rented rooms, and apartments.

Voodou, or Vodou (according to official Haitian Creole orthography), is a misleading but common term for the religious practices of 80 to 90 percent of the people of Haiti. A mountainous, poverty-stricken, largely agricultural country of approximately six million people, Haiti has a land area of 10,700 square miles that covers the western third of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with the Dominican Republic. The term vodou (or voodoo, a derivative) is also used, mostly in a derogatory sense, to refer to systems of sorcery and magic or to specific spells, or charms, emanating from such systems, which are often the most popular practiced by the descendants of the African slaves brought to the Western Hemisphere.

Outsiders have given the name Voodoo to the traditional religious practices of Haiti; only recently, and still to a very limited extent, have Haitians come to use the term as others do. The word can be traced to Vodun ("spirit" or "deity") in the language of the Fon peoples of Dahomey (present-day Benin). In contemporary Haiti, today refers to one ritual style or dance among many in the traditional religious system. Haitians prefer a verb to identify their religion: they speak of "serving the spirits."

Sensationalized novels and films, as well as suspicious travelers' accounts, have painted a highly distorted picture of Haitian religion. It has been inaccurately depicted as magic and sorcery that involves uncontrolled orastic behavior and even cannibalism. These distortions are undoubt-

ably attributable to racism and to the fact that the Haitian slave rebellion sparked in predomi-
nantly white nations. Haiti achieved independ-
ence in 1804, thus becoming a black republic in the Western Hemisphere at a time when the colo-
nial economy was still heavily dependent on slave labor.

Voodoo is an African-based, Catholic- influenced religion that serves those (not always clearly distinguished) categories of spiritual be-
ings: lum, limite, and lemms (respectively, "the dead," "the mysteries," and "the sacred twins").

While certain Voodoo prayers and invocations preserve fragments of West African languages, Haitian Creole is the primary language of Voodoo. Creole (Kreyol in the orthographical system employed in this article) is the first and only language of 40 percent of contemporary Haitian; it has a grammatical structure influenced by West African languages and a largely French vocabulary.

Although many individuals and families regularly serve the Voodoo spirits without recourse to religious professionals, Voodoo does have a loosely organized priesthood, open to both men and women. The male priest is called oungin and the female, mambé. There are many different types of Voodoo rituals, including individual acts of piety, such as the lighting of candles for particular spirits, and large feasts, sometimes of several days' duration, which include animal sacrifice as part of a meal offered to the spirits. Energetic drumming, singing, and dancing accompany the more elaborate rituals. In the countryside, rituals often take place outdoors on family land that has been set aside for the spirits. On this land there is often a small cell house, which houses the Voodoo altars. In the cities, most rituals occur in the oung ("temple"). Urban altars are maintained in jvé, small rooms usually off the peristil, which is the central dancing and ritualizing space of the temple.

The goal of Voodoo drumming, singing, and dancing is to "heat up," the situation sufficiently to bring on possession by the spirits. As a particular spirit is summoned, a devotee enters a trance and becomes that spirit's chal ("horse"), thus providing the means for direct communication between human beings and the spirits. The spirit is said to ride the chal; using that person's body and voice, the spirit sings, dances, and eats with the people and offers them advice and chantonnage. The people, in turn, offer the spirit a wide variety of gifts and acts of obeation whose goal is to placate the spirit and ensure his or her continuing protection.

There are marked differences in Voodoo as it is practiced throughout Haiti, but the single most important distinction is that between urban and rural Voodoo. The vast majority of Haiti is agricultural, and the manner in which peasants serve the spirits is determined by questions of land tenure and ancestral inheritance. Urban Voodoo is not tied to the land, but the family connection persists in another form. Urban temple communities become substitutes for the extended families of the countryside. The priests use the terms "papa" and "mamma"; the initiates, who are called "children of the house," refer to one another as "brother" and "sister." In general, urban Voodoo is more institutionalized and more elaborate than its rural counterpart.

African Influence

Haiti's slave population was largely built up in the eighteenth century, a period in which Haiti supplied a large percentage of the sugar consumed in Western Europe. Voodoo was born on the sugar plantations out of the interaction among slaves who brought with them a wide variety of African religious traditions. But, due to inadequate research, little is known about this formative period in Voodoo's history. There are, however, indications that Voodoo played a key role in the organization of the slave revolt (Leyburn 1941), as it apparently did in the downfall of President Jean-Claude Duvalier in February 1986. Three African groups appear to have had the strongest influence on Voodoo: the Yeouba of present-day Nigeria, the Fon of Dahomey (present-day Benin), and the Kongo of what are now Zaire and Angola. Many of the names of Voodoo spirits are easily traceable to their African counterparts; however, in the context of Haiti's social and economic history, these spirits have undergone change. For example, Ogun among the Yoruba is a spirit of ironworking and other activities associated with metal, such as hunting, warfare, and modern technology. Neither haunting nor modern technology plays a significant role in the lives of Haitians. Haitis does, however, have a long and complex military history; thus the Haitian spirit Ognon is a soldier whose rituals, iconography, and possession-performance explore both the constructive and destructive uses of military power, as well as its analogues within human relations—anger, self-assessment, and self-willfulness.

Africa itself is a powerful concept in Voodoo. Haitians speak of Git ("Guinea") both as their ancestral home, the continent of Africa, and as the watery subterranean home of the Voodoo spirits. Calling a spirit lagonpe lit. "Frank Guinea," is truly African; it is a way of indicating that the spirit is good, ancient, and proper. The manner in which an
individuals or a group serves the spirits may also be called frangines, with similar connotations of approval and propriety.

Roman Catholic Influence
The French slaveholders were Catholic, and baptism was mandatory for slaves. Many have argued that slaves used a veneer of Catholicism to hide their traditional religious practices from the authorities. While Catholicism may well have functioned in this utilitarian way for slaves on the plantations, it is also true that the religions of West Africa, from which Voodoo was derived, have a long tradition of syncretism. Whatever else Catholicism represented in the slave world, it was most likely also seen as a means to expand Voodoo's ritual vocabulary and iconography. Catholicism has had the greatest influence on the traditional religion of Haiti at the level of rite and image, rather than theology. This influence works in two ways. First, those who serve the spirits call themselves Catholic, attend Mass, go to confession, and undergo baptism and first communion, and, because these Catholic rituals are at times integral parts of certain larger Voodoo rites, they are often directed to follow them by the Voodoo spirits. Second, Catholic prayers, rites, images, and saints' names are integrated into the ritualizing in Voodoo temples and cult houses. An active figure in Voodoo is the prêtre ("brash priest"), who achieves his title by knowing the proper, often Latin, form of Catholic prayers. Though neither a Catholic nor a Voodoo priest, he is called into the Voodoo temple when the ritualizing has a significant Catholic dimension.

Over the years, a system of parishes has been developed between the Voodoo spirits and the Catholic saints. For example, Damhul, the ancient and venerable snake deity of the Fon peoples, is worshiped in Haiti both as Damhul and as Saint Patrick, who is pictured in the popular Catholic chronology with snakes clustered around his feet. In addition, the Catholic liturgical calendar dominates in much Voodoo ritualizing. Thus the Voodoo spirit Ogou is honored on 25 July, the feast day of his Catholic counterpart, Saint James the Elder.

Bundey, the "Good God," is identified with the Christian God and is said to be the highest, indeed the only, god. The spirits are said to have been exorcised in Lucifer's army whom God sent out of heaven and down to Gine. Although the spirits may exhibit capricious behavior, they are in no sense evil. Rather, they are seen as intermediaries between the people and the high god, a role identical to the one played by the so-called lower deities in the religions of the Yoruba and Fon. Bundey is remote and unknowable. Although evoked daily in ordinary speech (almost all plans are made with the disclaimer "if God wills"), Bundey's intervention is not sought for most of life's problems. That is the work of the spirits.

The Catholic church of Haiti has sometimes participated in the persecution of those who follow Voodoo. However, the last "antispiritual policy campaign" was in the 1960s, and currently there is an uneasy peace between Voodoo and the Catholic church. Until quite recently, the Catholic clergy routinely protested against serving the spirits, and those who served routinely remarked, "That is the way priests talk." Most Catholic events have a simultaneous Voodoo dimension that the Catholic church for the most part ignores. Since Catholicism is the official religion of Haiti and the church has been to some extent state-controlled, the degree to which Voodoo has been tolerated, or even encouraged has been at least partly a function of politics. For instance, Haitian presidents Duransei Estime (1946-1950) and François Duvalier (1957-1971) were known for their sympathy with Voodoo.

Voodoo Spirits
The Voodoo spirits are known by various names: lo (from a Yoruba word for "spirit" or "mystery"), sint ("saint"), mwo ("mysterious"), and, more rarely, amu ("angels"). In the countryside, the spirits are grouped into nannan ("nations"). Although no longer recognized as such by Haitians, the names of the Voodoo spirit nations almost all refer to places and peoples in Africa. For example, there are nannans known as Fada (after the Dibkan principality Alladah), Wangal (Angola), Mondon (Mandingo), Ibo, Nago (the Dahomean name for the Keta Yoruba and Konoga). In rural Voodoo, a person inherits responsibilities to one or more of these nations through maternal and paternal kin. Familial connections to the land, where the lo are said to reside in trees, springs and wells, also determine which spirits are served.
In urban Voodoo, two notion, the Rada and the Petro, have emerged as dominant largely by absorbing other notions. Rada and Petro spirits contrast sharply in temperament and domain. The Rada spirits are dons ("sweet") and known for their wisdom and benevolence. The Petro spirits were probably named for the Spanish Voodoo priest Dom Pedro; they show a marked Kongo influence and are considered chu ("hot"). Their power is stressed. Each spirit group has drum rhythms, dances, and food preferences that correspond, to its identifying characteristics. For example, Danbala, the gentle Rada snake spirit, is said to love "ori" a syrup made from almonds and sugar. His worshipers perform a sinuous spine-ripping dance called zombi. By contrast, the Petro rhythm, played for such numbing spirits as Dom Petro and Tijan Petro, is energetic and pounding, and the accompanying dance is characterized by rapid shoulder movements.

The Voodoo View of the Person

In Voodoo, the human being is composed of various parts: the body, that is, the gross physical parts of the person, which perishes after death, and from two to four souls, of which the most widely acknowledged are the gwo bonani and the ti bonan. The gwo bonani ("big guardian angel") is roughly equivalent to consciousness or personality. When a person dies, the gwo bonani survives, and immediately after death it is most vulnerable to capture and misuse by sorcerers. During possession, it is the gwo bonani that is displaced by the spirit and sent to wander away from the body, as it does routinely during sleep. The ti bonan ("little guardian angel") may be thought of as the conscience or the spiritual energy reserve of a living person and, at times, as the ghost of a dead person. Each person is said to have one spirit who is the mi-te or "master of the head.") The mi-te is the major protector and central spirit served by that person, and it is that spirit that corresponds to the gwo bonani. Because the gwo bonani is the soul that endures after death and because it is connected to a particular family line, a person who venerates his ancestors inherits the service of particular spirits. In addition to the master of the head, each person has a small number of other lwa with whom whom there is a special protective connection. There is a rough parallel between the character of the spirits and those of the people who serve them. Thus the language of Voodoo is also a language for categorizing and analyzing the behavior of groups and individuals. For example, when an individual, family, or temple is described as worshiping in a mode that is Rada orf, ("straight Rada"), a great deal is also being said about how that person or group functions socially.

Voodoo and the Dead

In both urban and rural Haiti, cemeteries are major ritual centers. The first male buried in any cemetery is known as the Baron. Baron's wife is an amulet called a fete, and it is the ritualizing center of the cemetery. Lighted candles and food offerings are placed at the feet of Baron's cross. In addition, many rituals for healing, love, or luck that are performed in the rural cult houses or the urban temples are not considered complete until the physical remains of the "work" are deposited at cemeteries or at Baron's cross, which is itself a kind of crossroads marking the intersection of the land of the living and the land of the dead.

Haitians make a distinction between loun ("the dead") and feminti ("the mysterious"). Within Voodoo, there are rituals and offerings for particular family dead; however, if these ancestral spirits are seen as strong and effective, they can, with time, become mi-te. The group of spirits known as the gôd are not ancestral spirits but mi-te, and their leader is the well-known Baron Samdi, or Baron Saturday. In and around Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti and its largest city, the gôd are the object of elaborate ritualizing in the cemeteries and Voodoo temples during the season of the Catholic Feast of All Souls, or Halloween.

The gôd are not only spirits of death but also patrons of human sexuality, protectors of children, and irreplaceable social satirists. Dances for gôd tend to be boisterous affairs, and new gôd spirits appear every year. The satirical, and often explicitly sexual, humor of the gôd levels social pretense. Appearing, as auto mechanics, doctors, government officials, priests, Protestants missionaries, and, to forth, the gôd use humor to deal with new social roles and to question alternation social hierarchies.
Voodoo Ceremonies

In rural Voodoo, the ideal is to serve the spirits as simply as possible because simplicity of ritual is said to reflect real power and the true African way of doing things (Larose, 1977). In practice, rural ritualizing tends to follow the fortunes of the extended families. Fixed times are said to be due to the displeasure of the family spirits. When it is thought to be no longer possible to satisfy the spirits with small conciliatory offerings, the family will hold a large drumming and dancing feast that includes animal sacrifice.

Urban Voodoo, by contrast, has a more routine ritualizing calendar, and events tend to be larger and more elaborate. Ceremonies in honor of major spirits take place annually on or around the feast days of their Catholic counterparts and usually include sacrifice of an appropriate animal—most frequently a chicken, a goat, or a cow. A wide variety of ceremonies meet specific individual and community needs: for example, healing rites, dedications of new temples and new ritual regalia, and spirit marriages in which a devotee “marries” a spirit of the opposite sex and pledges to exercise sexual restraint one night each week in order to receive that spirit in dreams. There is also a cycle of initiation rituals that has both public segments and segments reserved for initiates. The latter include the bannoo rituals, which mark the first stage of initiation, and those in which the initiate takes the asoon, the bended ground yattle that is the symbol of the Voodoo priesthood. Certain rituals performed during the initiation cycle, such as the bannoo (a “burning of the pover”) and the crime nyan (“shredding of the palm leaf”) may also be used in other ritual contexts. Details rituals include the dinmoun, in which the grov yann is removed from the corpse and sent under the waters, and the rol yol naan dol (“calling the dead up from the waters”) a ritual that can occur any time after a period of 4 years and a day from the date of death. Good-luck baths are administered during the Christmas and New Year season. Many of the rituals of urban Voodoo are performed in rural Haiti as well.

Antilal pilgrimages draw thousands of urban and rural followers of Voodoo. The local profit of events, which are at once Catholic and Voodoo, is usually a Catholic church situated near some striking feature of the natural landscape that is believed to be sacred to the Voodoo spirits. The two largest pilgrimages are one held for Enri Dantlo (Our Lady of Mount Carmel) in mid-July in the little town of Sant d’Eau, named for its spectacular waterfall, and one held for Ogou Saint James the Elder in the latter part of July in the northern town of Plain du Nord, where a shallow pool adjacent to the Catholic church is sacred to Ogou.

Voodoo and Magic

Serge Larose (1977) has demonstrated that magic is not only a stereotypic label that outsiders have applied to Voodoo, but also a different term internal to the religion. Thus an en-group among the followers of Voodoo identifies its own ritualizing as “African” while labeling the work of the out-group as mal (“magie”). Generally speaking, this perspective provides a helpful means of grasping the concept of magic within Voodoo. There are, however, those individuals who, in their search for power and wealth, have self-consciously identified themselves with traditions of what Haitians would call the “work of the left hand.” This includes people who deal in jwey achat (“purchased points”), which means spirits or powers that have been bought rather than inherited, and people who deal in zombi. A zombi may be either the disembodied soul of a dead person whose powers are used for magical purposes, or a soulless body that has been raised from the grave to do drom drom in the fields. Also included in the category of the left hand are secret societies known by such names as Champval, Zobop, and Bizango. These powerful groups are magic not for personal gain but to enforce social sanctions. Wade Davis (1985) claims that zombi laborers are created by judgments of tribunals of secret societies against viciously iniquious persons.

The “work of the left hand” should not be confused with more ordinary Voodoo ritualizing that also has a magical flavor, such as divination, herbal healing, and the manufacture of charms for love or luck, or for the protection of the home, land, or person. Much of the work of Voodoo priests is at the level of individual client-practitioner interactions. There is a healing system that treats problems of love, health, family, and work. Unless a problem is understood as coming from God, in which case the Voodoo priests can do nothing, the priest will treat it as one caused by a spirit or by a disruption in human relationships, including relations with the
dead. Generally speaking, cures come through a ritual adjustment of relational systems.

Voodoo in the Haitian Diaspora

Drought and soil erosion, poverty, high urban unemployment, and political oppression in Haiti have led to massive emigration in the last three decades. Voodoo has moved along with the Haitians who have come to the major urban centers of North America in search of better life. In Miami, New York, and Montreal, the cities with the greatest concentrations of Haitian immigrants, Voodoo ceremonies are carried on in storefronts, rented rooms, and high-rise apartments. North American rituals are often truncated versions of their Haitian counterparts. There may be no drouzes, and the only animals sacrificed may be chickens. However, it is possible to consider a mombé or repas in these immigrant communities with étre, and the full repertoire of rituals is found there in one form or another. Even the pilgrimages are duplicated. On 16 July, rather than going to the mountain town of Saint d’Envo to honor Ezili Danto, New York Haitians take the subway to the Italian-American Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the Bronx.